

06/18/21 Friday

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In New Shipbuilding Plan, US Navy Steps Away From Vaunted 355-Ship Fleet Goal
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The US Navy submitted to Congress an unusual 30-year shipbuilding plan on Thursday that includes a potentially smaller fleet than the 355 ships the service has aspired to since 2016. Updated 30-year projections are required to be submitted to Congress annually, although [according to the](#) Congressional Research Service, one typically isn't sent by an administration during its first year in office. However, the Biden administration has sent an abbreviated one earlier this week and promised a fuller report in 2022.

A major shift [in the document](#) is that it says that a fleet smaller than 355 ships could potentially be enough to counter China's growing People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). In 2016, the Pentagon concluded that 355 ships was the minimum number the Navy would need by 2030 - later extended to 2049 - but this new report says that as few as 321 manned vessels - or as many as 372 manned vessels - are both potential goals.

The report also includes between 77 and 140 unmanned vessels, a still-experimental but growing interest of the Navy. For fiscal year 2022, the [service has requested](#) \$580 million for research and development of three different classes of unmanned vessel - more than twice the budget for fiscal year 2021.

US Secretary of Defense [Lloyd Austin told](#) the Senate Appropriations Committee on Thursday that "355 is a good goal to shoot for."

"I want to make sure that we have the right mix of capabilities - size matters - but capabilities also matter. We're going to continue to work with the Navy and with this committee to make sure the right capabilities are in place."

The plan still broadly follows shipbuilding plans laid out in the final months of the Trump administration. A [Future Force Study](#) the Navy released in September 2020 proposed dramatic shifts in fleet composition, including a massive force of between 480 and 512 hulls by 2045, of which at least 140 would be unmanned. The upper limit of the Thursday document is also 512 vessels.

However, a 30-year shipbuilding plan from the White House Office of Management and Budget from December [suggested paring down](#) the number of carriers from 11 aircraft carriers to just seven by 2046. While Thursday's report contains no exact construction plans beyond the fiscal year 2022 budget request, it does include between nine and 11 carriers in its potential force layouts, as well as eight or nine amphibious assault ships, which the Navy has explored repurposing [as "lightning carriers"](#) loaded down with F-35B fighters.

The [US Navy presently has](#) 296 vessels in its inventory and 251 in commission. However, the Navy's shipbuilding timetable [is well below](#) its official goals, being presently on track to be 13 ships short by 2025.

By comparison, the Chinese PLAN is already nominally larger than the US Navy and plans to [grow to 425 ships](#), becoming a more potent force as older vessels are replaced by new advanced warships that include [stealth-detecting destroyers](#), large cruisers, aircraft carriers and amphibious assault ships. The force presently has just two aircraft carriers in service, although a prolonged focus on [long-range missiles](#) has ensured the PLAN is able to punch above its weight, posing a danger to US warships that come within hundreds of miles of shore.

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Snubbing Vatican's Advice, US Catholic Bishops Vote to Deny Biden Eucharist for Abortion Support
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Conservative Catholics in the US have been building momentum against their liberal counterparts for some time, attempting to deny communion to Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and then-Vice President Joe Biden for their pro-choice policies as early as 2013, when Francis was inaugurated as pope.

In [a Thursday vote](#) of 168 to 55, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops voted to draft what they called a "teaching document" that would authorize American bishops to withhold the Eucharist from politicians who support or defend abortion rights. The move is widely interpreted as a rebuke of US President Joe Biden.

The document is reportedly intended as a rebuttal to Catholic politicians not politically implementing the teachings of the Church, which strongly opposes abortion.

According to [the Associated Press](#), the conference was advised last month by the Holy See to proceed carefully and deliberately, and earlier this month, Pope Francis preached that receiving the Eucharist "is not the reward of saints, but the bread of sinners".

The rite is among the most important in Christianity, a sacrament symbolising the Passover meal Jesus enjoyed with his disciples shortly before being crucified, and, more broadly, the new covenant Christians believe they forged with God by choosing to follow Jesus instead of remaining Jews.

"The concern in the Vatican is not to use access to the Eucharist as a political weapon", Antonio Spadaro, an Italian Jesuit priest who is politically close to Francis, told [The New York Times](#). However, in 2013, Francis directed Argentine bishops to do just that.

"[People] cannot receive Holy Communion and at the same time act with deeds or words against the commandments, particularly when abortion, euthanasia, and other grave crimes against life and family are encouraged", [Francis wrote](#) just months after being selected pontiff.

"This responsibility weighs particularly over legislators, heads of governments, and health professionals".

Biden is Catholic and personally opposes abortion, but has supported women's right to have one because he doesn't feel his personal religious beliefs should be imposed on others.

"It's a private matter, and I don't think that's going to happen", he told reporters on Friday when asked about the decision.

Catholics in America are sharply divided on the issue. While 56% support legalised abortion, about two-thirds of those who regularly attend Mass don't, according to a [March poll by Pew](#). Polls also show Catholics are split by the issue along party lines. [Another Pew poll](#) shows that 55% of Catholic Republicans think Biden should be denied communion, while 87% of Catholic Democrats don't.

Democrats have also mounted increasing pressure on Biden to take action in defence of abortion rights as Republicans, motivated by Biden's defeat of Donald Trump and the shifting of both houses of Congress to nominal control by the Democrats, have rushed to introduce a wave of anti-abortion bills.

According to a 7 June count by [the Guttmacher Institute](#), 561 abortion restrictions, including 165 abortion bans, have been introduced in 47 state legislatures in 2021 alone, 83 of which have been enacted. The latest, signed into law on Wednesday by Texas Governor Greg Abbott, would [automatically ban abortion](#) in the Lone Star State if the US Supreme Court were to overturn its 1973 ruling in the Roe vs. Wade case.

That [followed another abortion](#) restriction bill signed into law last month by Abbott that banned getting an abortion as early as six weeks after conception. Opponents have derided the bill as a de facto ban on abortion, since it would only leave as little as two weeks after a missed period - when most women would begin to suspect they were pregnant - before aborting the pregnancy would become illegal.

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US to Withdraw Patriot Systems From Middle East, Repair Them for Use Against China, Report Says

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Just weeks ago, the Saudi government asked the US to help defend them against the Houthis or a potential attack by Iran; now the Pentagon has said the Saudis are capable of shouldering most of their defensive needs in their war in Yemen.

The US has already begun withdrawing some of its air defense forces from several Middle Eastern countries as it shifts them back to the US for maintenance, according to a Friday report by the [Wall Street Journal](#) (WSJ).

Citing administration officials, the report notes that several MIM-104 Patriot air defense batteries have been pulled out of Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and that at least one Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system is also being pulled out of Saudi Arabia. Fighter squadrons are also being pulled out.

In all, the withdrawal amounts to hundreds of troops who crew and maintain the batteries, which for Patriots can include a radar, engagement control station, antenna mast group, electric power plant, and up to 16 separate missile launchers. For THAAD, each battery includes two mobile tactical operations centers, a powerful ground-based radar, and at least six missile launch systems.

Movement of the air defense sets was [reportedly being considered](#) in April, with the WSJ noting at the time that the Pentagon hoped to convince the Saudis to assume more responsibility for their own defense.

A senior defense official said on Friday that the pullout returns the US to a more typical deployment in the region after years of tensions with Iran stoked by the Trump administration and a raging war in Yemen by the Saudis and their allies. While Riyadh's war against the rebel Houthi movement in Yemen continues, in recent weeks [significant progress](#) has been made by the Biden administration in negotiations to return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a deal with Iran and six other nations.

The deal required Iran to give up its nuclear program in exchange for the lowering of international sanctions against its economy; then-US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in 2018, claiming that Iran was secretly violating it, and he reimposed the sanctions and forced US allies to respect them. In response, Iran began to back away from the treaty's limitations, increasing the quality and quantity of uranium it was refining. In Iran, [presidential elections](#) were held on Friday in which President Hassan Rouhani, the leader who signed the JCPOA with Germany, the EU, and the UN Security Council permanent members, was no longer eligible to run. The man projected to win, Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's chief justice, is a conservative seen as closer to Ayatollah Khamenei than Rouhani, a moderate. [Biden said Friday](#) he wants the JCPOA to be back in operation before Raisi takes office in six weeks' time.

However, the withdrawal stands at odds with comments made just weeks ago by US Marine Corps Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of US Central Command.

[McKenzie told members](#) of the press in Riyadh on May 23 that the Saudis "want reassurance that they're going to be helped if they're attacked by Iran, and they want help against the continuing attacks ... They're under constant bombardment from Yemen, with a variety of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and small UAS (unmanned aerial systems) they're very concerned about."

"I believe our posture in the theater has prevented a state on state attack from Iran," the CENTCOM chief added.

However, tens of thousands of US troops will remain in the region, including at least 2,500 in Iraq after Baghdad and Washington [agreed to halve](#) the US presence, although no definitive date for reaching that number has been reached.

The shifts are part of a larger redeployment plan involving thousands of US troops around the globe as the Pentagon shifts away from the War on Terror that governed its strategic thinking for nearly 20 years and toward what it calls "great power confrontation" with Russia and China. It's unclear where the Patriots and THAAD will be sent once they're repaired.

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'Absolutely Not': Imran Khan Swats Down CIA Request to Use Pakistani Bases for Afghanistan Ops

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The Pentagon and US State Department have been pursuing former Soviet republics to Afghanistan's north as places to continue operations after the September 2021 withdrawal, but have so far had little luck, given their proximity and ties to the Russian Federation.

Pakistani President Imran [Khan told Axios](#) in an interview due to be aired on Sunday that the CIA will "absolutely not" be allowed to operate from Pakistani soil after the US completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan later this year.

The US' loss is not for want of trying: CIA Director William Burns and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin have both visited Pakistan in recent months to discuss continued cooperation. However, the Pakistani government, long close to the Taliban, against whom the US would most likely be operating, has rebuffed all attempts as a compromise.

Pakistan's Inter-Service-Intelligence (ISI) agency was Washington's gateway to Afghanistan for decades before the US invasion in October 2001, providing an avenue by which the US could funnel financial and materiel support to Afghan tribesmen fighting the socialist Afghan government and its Soviet allies in the 1980s, including those that later became the Taliban, and then to groups resisting the Taliban government that came to power after the socialist government collapsed in 1996.

According to the [New York Times](#), the US is once again searching for proxies in Afghanistan to support after the last US forces leave on September 11, apparently reflecting a belief that the Taliban, now out of power, won't take peace talks seriously and that the US-backed Afghan government will quickly collapse in the face of a renewed Taliban offensive.

While the US and Taliban reached a peace deal in February 2020 for the US to end its 20-year occupation of the country and [remove its remaining](#) soldiers, a similar deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government has proven more elusive.

However, while Islamabad won't cooperate with the US any longer, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has signaled that his administration might seek out their help in achieving stability without the US.

"Peace will primarily be decided upon regionally, and I believe we are at a crucial moment of rethinking. It is first and foremost a matter of getting Pakistan on board," Ghani [told Der Spiegel](#) last month. "The US now plays only a minor role. The question of peace or hostility is now in Pakistani hands."

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Rough Waters: Carnival Corp. Says Customer, Employee Info Exposed in Third Data Breach Since 2019

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Carnival Corporation subsidiary Princess Cruises announced last year that it had identified "suspicious activity" by an individual or entity who, in mid-2019, gained access to the personal information of both travelers and employees. It was later disclosed that the Carnival Corporation fell victim to a similar cyber attack on August 15, 2020.

Carnival Corporation revealed to customers in a Thursday memo that an unauthorized actor may have obtained access to a number of individuals' personal details, including Social Security numbers, health records, passport information and dates of birth.

The data breach reportedly occurred on March 19, and impacted the British-American cruise operator's popular subsidiaries: Carnival Cruise Line, Princess Cruises Carnival Corp subsidiaries. Employees were also impacted by the data breach.

The company did not disclose how many individuals may have had their personal information compromised.

Carnival spokesperson Roger Frizzell detailed that the cruise operator hired a cybersecurity firm to investigate the "unauthorized third-party" who gained access to the cruise operator's IT systems.

Those possibly impacted by the data breach have been notified, and the company has established a call center to assist with the matter, Frizzell asserted to The Hill on Friday.

The Carnival spokesperson claimed that, based on current evidence, there is no reason to believe the data is being misused.

While the cruise operator has reportedly implemented enhancements to its cybersecurity and privacy programs, this incident comes as the third major data breach associated with the Carnival Corporation since 2019.

Following both the 2019 data breach with Princess Cruises and the 2020 data breach with the Carnival Corporation, the [cruise operator pledged](#) to conduct a "review" to enhance its cybersecurity.

News of Carnival's latest breach comes alongside a [string of alleged cyberattacks](#) on US-affiliated companies and infrastructure. Within recent months, US-based [JBS SA beef plants](#), [Cox Media Group](#) and the [Colonial Pipeline](#) have all been disrupted by ransomware. JBS and the Colonial Pipeline were not able to resume normal operations until they wired the cybercriminals some \$11 million and \$4.4 million, respectively.

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Mexican Conservatives Vow Legal Action After Alleged Hackers Issue Gay Pride Tweets
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Earlier this week, the Twitter account for Mexico's Solidarity Encounter Party, or Partido Encuentro Solidario (PES), added a rainbow overlay to its logo and issued a series of tweets that, in part, called for equal rights for all. Netizens were quick to tie the act to a hacker, rather than the conservative Christian party.

The Solidarity Encounter Party proclaimed late Thursday night that it will pursue legal action against the individual(s), who "hacked" their Twitter profile and tweeted several pro-LGBTQ+ and gay pride-themed slogans.

"Amor es amor," reads a since-deleted tweet that was hashtagged Sinaloa and Baja California - Mexicans states that recently approved same-sex marriage legislation.

Many of the conservative party's tweets received tens of thousands of likes and other Twitter engagements before they were deleted.

"Was the account of the Solidarity Meeting Party hacked? Or were they already like that and I didn't even take into account?" posed one netizen in a [translated tweet](#).

According to the right-wing fundamentalist Christian party, the tweets exhibited "a lack of respect for our institution."

"We will continue with legal action against whoever hacked our social media," the conservative group said, according to the Associated Press.

It has been suggested that the rainbow overlay on the Solidary Encounter Party logo came about due to a disgruntled and unpaid social media manager.

"We repeat that the alleged debt owed to the Community Manager is not the fault of the PES, but rather of the contractor, with whom there is no debt," the conservative group claimed, loosely responding to the reports.

The party has since regained access to its account.

The Solidary Encounter Party, or PES, was launched in Mexico last year and acts as a replacement for the Social Encounter Party, a Christian, socially-conservative political party that failed to meet the vote share threshold in the 2018 general election.

The conservative group refers to itself as "The Party of the Family, Life, Peace and Reconciliation," or "El Partido de la Familia, la Vida, la Paz y la Reconciliación." Additionally, the party has advocated for so-called "traditional families," and is overwhelmingly anti-abortion.

Despite its recent formation, PES may go the same way as the SEP, as it failed to secure the necessary 3% of votes in most states during the June 7, 2021, Mexican legislative election.

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'China News Network': CNN Branded Beijing Propagandist After Story on COVID Vaccination Rate

by [Evan Craighead](#)

CNN raised eyebrows on Friday after publishing an analysis purporting that China has administered almost 1 billion doses of its COVID-19 vaccines. The article, authored by two CNN journalists based in Hong Kong, comes ahead of the US media outlet's 'three-times-a-week' update on Beijing's growing influence.

Citing data from China's National Health Commission, CNN's Nectar Gan and Laura He on June 18 claimed that the country has administered over 945 million doses of its COVID-19 vaccines.

"Within days, China will reach a staggering 1 billion doses in its Covid-19 vaccination drive -- a scale and speed unrivaled by any other country in the world," reads the article.

Netizens have pointed out, however, that the article omitted any information regarding the efficacy of China's vaccines, despite the World Health Organization (WHO) approving the emergency use of Sinovac's CoronaVac and Sinopharm's COVID-19 vaccine.

"For those still reluctant, China has a powerful tool in its arsenal: a top-down, one-party system that is all-encompassing in reach and forceful in action, and a sprawling bureaucracy that can

be swiftly mobilized," reads the article, claiming that Beijing is operating on a policy of "vaccinate all who can be vaccinated."

Many have refuted CNN's analysis, accusing the mainstream outlet of pushing Chinese "propaganda", and including "unverified numbers".

"Their numbers are as trustworthy as Tom Cruise's self-account of his height," quipped podcaster [Jeff Blehar](#). "Beyond that, good for republishing CCP propaganda as a news story." Both vaccines are made in Beijing and were created using established technology on an inactivated virus. Unlike the mRNA vaccines manufactured by Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson, the WHO-approved Chinese vaccines can be stored at refrigerator temperatures, allowing the vaccines to be transported to, and administered in, areas experiencing poverty or lack of resources.

Per WHO panel data, Sinopharm's COVID-19 vaccine has a 79% efficacy rate in preventing symptomatic COVID-19 in adults aged 18 to 59 years old.

The WHO panel reported earlier this month that Beijing's CoronaVac vaccine is only 51% effective at combating COVID-19 in late-stage trials.

Alongside touting the reported number of vaccine doses administered in China, the CNN analysis also notes that China's National Health Commission is unable to offer a breakdown of how many individuals have been fully vaccinated in the country.

Beijing is hoping to vaccinate some 40% of its population of 1.4 billion by the end of June, according to epidemiologist and Chinese government adviser Zhong Nanshan. This comes a month behind [China's previous estimate](#).

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RPT: ANALYSIS - Mutated COVID-19 Variants in Unvaccinated Populations Threaten Pandemic Recovery

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The timeline for ending the novel coronavirus pandemic will depend on how soon vaccines can be delivered to unvaccinated populations, especially in developing countries, in order to prevent the further mutation of COVID-19, which risks upending the mass distribution efforts, experts told Sputnik.

US President Joe Biden warned on Friday that unvaccinated people are in growing danger due to the spread of the Delta variant of coronavirus, which he said is more easily transmissible, potentially deadlier and particularly dangerous for young people.

"I am less concerned about decreasing antibodies than I am concerned about the populations in the US and globally that are not vaccinated," Dr. Edward Trapido, an epidemiology professor and associate dean for research at the Louisiana State University School of Public Health, told Sputnik. "As long as there are cases anywhere, we are at risk everywhere."

In the US right now, Trapido warned, every state has pockets of people who are not vaccinated. "When variants occur, they can spread quickly and result in lots of cases among unvaccinated people. Globally there are many populations that have no or few vaccines," Trapido said.

Trapido foresees the pandemic lasting up to 2022, by then downgrading to an endemic. However, he said the recovery timeline could be delayed by international travel, refugees fleeing war and dangerous situations, which may spur the virus to mutate.

Earlier this month, the World Health Organization included the Delta strain in its list of the so-called variants of concern as it became prevalent and caused a sharp surge in infections in some countries, especially India, where it was first identified.

Vaccine distribution efforts should focus on Brazil, India, Pakistan, Nepal, countries in South and Central America, among other developing countries, Trapido said.

The Instituto Butantan, a Brazilian biologic research center, said in a statement there are at least 19 variants of coronavirus that have been identified in the Brazilian state of Sao Paulo, with the P.1 (Amazonian) strain prevailing in 89.9 percent of cases, followed by the strain B.1.1.7, first detected in the United Kingdom, which accounts for 4.2 percent.

The COVID-19 related infection and death rates have dropped significantly low in the United States since about March, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), but it does not indicate the risk for another wave is over.

"We are getting closer to an epidemic in the US, and will probably get to being endemic, like flu," Trapido said. "However, we may see a surge in the winter- as people spend less time outdoors." Biden announced on Friday that the United States administered over 300 million doses of coronavirus vaccines over the last 150 days with 15 states and the District of Columbia reaching a 70 percent vaccination rate. He said that existing vaccines offer sufficient protection to fully inoculated.

Dr. Paulo Verardi, a professor of virology and vaccinology at the University of Connecticut, told Sputnik countries need to have at least two-thirds, if not three-quarters or more of their populations vaccinated to achieve a level of immunity that would disrupt cycles of transmission effectively, and therefore prevent additional waves of infection.

However, he also cautioned about the new variants emerging around the world.

"We now have more transmissible variants of concern added to the equation, and we still have to monitor the durability of vaccine-induced protective immunity," Verardi said. "Consequently, we still have to be very cautious and vigilant, even here in the US"

Verardi underscored that it is important work to make vaccines available to people around the world, including low-income countries, as soon as possible, because it is the only way to control the pandemic and avoid future surges of cases.

Last week, the G7 countries pledged to donate over one billion doses of the COVID-19 vaccines to the lowest-income economies. The United States had previously pledged to donate 500 million doses of the Pfizer vaccine to the world, aside from the 80 million doses it is beginning to deliver to countries already.

Russia's Sputnik V vaccine has been approved in 67 countries since the drug's registration last August. According to the latest analysis of data on the post-vaccination infection percentage among 3.8 million vaccinated Russians, the vaccine shows 97.6% efficacy against symptomatic COVID-19 cases.

Russia and China combined have donated about 15 million doses worldwide, but they each are expected to provide more than 600 million doses.

There have been more than 177 million confirmed cases of COVID-19 and more than 3.8 million deaths caused by the disease around the world since the outbreak began in early 2020,

according to the WHO. More than 2.3 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been administered globally, the organization revealed in data.

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White House Denies Holding Back Security Assistance to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration never decided to hold back security assistance to Ukraine, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in response to media reports that the US government held back \$100 million in arms to Kiev.

"The idea that we have held back security assistance to Ukraine is nonsense. Just last week - in the run-up to the US-Russia Summit - we provided a \$150-million package of security assistance, including lethal assistance. We have now provided the entire amount appropriated by Congress through the Ukraine security assistance initiative," Psaki said on Friday.

The Biden administration, Psaki added, has even prepared contingency funds "in the event of a further Russian incursion into Ukraine."

Earlier in the day, Politico - citing three unnamed sources - reported that the US suspended the transfer of arms as tensions with Russia subsided.

In the spring, according to the report, the US National Security Council was directed to put the package together as the United States grew increasingly concerned over massive Russian military exercises near the border with Ukraine and in the Crimean Peninsula.

The United States has committed more than \$2.5 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since 2014, including lethal weapons.

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US Federal Judge Grants Injunction to Stop CDC From Blocking Cruise Industry in Florida

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - US District Judge Steven Merryday ruled in favor of the state of Florida in a lawsuit challenging a US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention order that makes it practically impossible for cruise ships to resume sailing due to the novel coronavirus pandemic.

"Florida's motion for preliminary injunction is GRANTED, and CDC is PRELIMINARILY ENJOINED from enforcing against a cruise ship arriving in, within, or departing from a port in Florida the conditional sailing order and the later measures (technical guidelines, manuals and the like)," Merryday wrote in the court order.

Merryday said cruises would be effectively blocked from operating if the CDC order were to continue and such a course of action would harm Florida. The judge thus granted a preliminary injunction that prevents the CDC from enforcing the order pending further legal action on a broader Florida lawsuit.

In addition to the irreparable damage cause to Florida, Merryday also cited as reasons for his decision the comparative injury, the immediate material threat to the state's public interest and the probability of success in future courts based on the merits of Florida's legal arguments against the CDC order.

Florida initially sued the Biden administration and the CDC in April over the continued closure of the cruise industry amid growing numbers of Americans who have acquired immunity whether naturally or via vaccines and other treatments as well as because of the significantly lower numbers of new cases and fatalities.

Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody called the injunction a victory for Floridians whose livelihoods depend on the cruise industry. Moody also said the US federal government does not and should not have the power to indefinitely shut down an entire industry.

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Blinken, Polish Counterpart Discuss Cooperating on Nord Stream 2 'Threat' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Polish counterpart Zbigniew Rau about cooperating against threats posed by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"The Secretary also discussed our cooperation with Poland to address the threat posed by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to European energy security," Price said on Friday.

The Biden administration has consistently objected to the pipeline project despite waiving sanctions against the Nord Stream CEO and AG last month.

The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is nearly complete, is designed to transport natural gas across the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany. Russia insists that the Nord Stream 2 project is purely an economic endeavor.

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White House Denies Holding Back Security Assistance to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration never decided to hold back security assistance to Ukraine, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in response to media reports that the US government held back \$100 million worth of arms for Ukraine.

"The idea that we have held back security assistance to Ukraine is nonsense. Just last week - in the run-up to the US-Russia Summit - we provided a \$150-million package of security assistance, including lethal assistance. We have now provided the entire amount appropriated by Congress through the Ukraine security assistance initiative," Psaki said on Friday.

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US Envoy Urges Yemen Government to Return to Aden, Honor Riyadh Deal - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking urged the country's government leaders to return to the city of Aden as soon as possible, and move rapidly to implement the Riyadh accord, as well reducing the level of fighting in the city of Marib, the State Department said.

"Special Envoy Lenderking met with officials from the governments of the Republic of Yemen and Saudi Arabia," the State Department said in a media note on Friday. "[Lenderking] noted the need for the Yemeni government to return to Aden as soon as possible and highlighted the importance of swift progress in the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement."

Lenderking also discussed the latest efforts to achieve a comprehensive, nationwide ceasefire and emphasized the importance of the free flow of goods, especially fuel, through Hudaydah port and throughout Yemen, the note said.

"The special envoy also discussed with the Omanis their recent visit to Sana'a and reiterated US appreciation for the efforts of Oman in encouraging peace efforts in Yemen," the note added.

While in Saudi Arabia, Lederking also held talks on the conflict with UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths and representatives of the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council, according to the note.

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UN Special Envoy Decries Violence in Myanmar as 900 Civilians Already Killed

UNITED NATIONS, June 18 (Sputnik) - Some 900 civilians have been killed by security forces in Myanmar since the military takeover on February 1, United Nations Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener told the UN General Assembly.

"Despite attempts by the military and its appointed officials to justify its ongoing repression, we must refrain firm: there can be no business as usual under the current circumstance," Schraner Burgener said on Friday. "Killings continue. Some 900 civilian protesters and passerby have been verified by the organization Assistant Association for Political Prisoners since February." Schraner Burgener also said Myanmar is seeing increased risk of sexual violence by security forces against anti-coup protesters.

"These numbers are climbing as the military struggles to stabilize its hold on power," she said. The special envoy said civilians have started to form defense unions after receiving military training from ethnic groups and these developments could lead to a large-scale civil war. "The opportunity to reverse the military takeover is narrowing and regional threat is increasing," she said.

Schraner Burgener called on the UN member states to continue pushing for all-inclusive dialogue to not miss the opportunity to put Myanmar on the path of democracy.

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Alberta First Canadian Province to Lift All COVID-19 Restrictions By July 1 - Premier

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - Alberta will lift all COVID-19 restrictions by Canada's national holiday on July 1, becoming first province to fully reopen, Premier Jason Kenney announced.

"On July 1, on Canada Day, Alberta's public health measures will be lifted, and our lives will get back to normal," Kenney said during a press briefing on Friday.

The announcement comes a day after the province met its target of partially vaccinating 70 percent of residents; nearly a quarter of Albertans age 12 and older are now fully vaccinated. Alberta first declared a state of emergency in response to the novel coronavirus pandemic on March 17, 2020.

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Libya Prepares Plan For Withdrawal of Foreign Fighters – UN Coordinator

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) – Libya's military leadership is drawing up plans to expel foreign fighters and mercenaries from the country, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations, Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Libya Georgette Gagnon said on Friday. "As of today, there has been no withdrawal of mercenaries, or foreign fighters, but plans are being prepared for withdrawal, notably by Libya's Joint Military Commission, the JMC or five plus five," Gagnon said during a UN Security Council (UNSC) Arria formula meeting on the departure of foreign combatants from Libya. "The joint military commission is due to further discuss a precise plan for the sequencing of the withdrawal of the mercenaries. A phased structure for this, and disarmament prior to withdrawal, is the subject of further negotiations between the parties."

Gagnon has called upon the UNSC to identify all stakeholders, including Sudan and Chad, which should provide for the orderly withdrawal process to avoid destabilization of Libya and neighboring countries.

Sanctions against states that continue to contravene the UNSC resolutions of Libya as well as threats of sanctions against key Libyans influencing the presence of mercenaries are both a possible solution to the problem of foreign fighters, Cagnon added.

In May, UN Special Envoy for Libya Jan Kubis said the withdrawal of foreign fighters and mercenaries had stalled, contributing to further division of the country between the Government of National Accord and the Libyan National Army which signed a nationwide ceasefire agreement following talks held in October in Geneva.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) -

MERKEL-MACRON MEETING

* The European Union, like the United States, should have a dialogue with Russia, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Friday.

UKRAINE SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine (NSDC) decided to extend sanctions introduced in 2018 against legal entities and individuals, including citizens of Russia, NSDC secretary Oleksiy Danilov said on Friday.

* NSDC has decided to impose sanctions against Rostec CEO Sergey Chemezov, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said.

RUSSIA-LIBYA RELATIONS

- * The Libyan Government of National Unity (GNU) supports the fact that Russia has strengthened ties with all sides of the intra-Libyan conflict, GNU State Minister for Communication and Political Affairs Ammar Al-Lafi told Sputnik on Friday.
- * Russia and the United States have provided strong support to Libya's GNU, Al-Lafi told Sputnik.

COVID-19

- * Canada is extending its border restrictions that limit so-called "non-essential" travel from the United States through July 21, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said on Friday.
- * The European Union officially approved the June 16 decision to lift the previously introduced COVID-19-related travel ban on US, Albanian, Lebanese, Macedonian and Serbian citizens, according to a statement by the Council of the European Union.

GUTERRES REAPPOINTED AS UN SECRETARY GENERAL

- * UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday was appointed for a second term at the helm of the organization, UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir said.
- * Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday sent a congratulatory message to Guterres who was appointed for his second term, the Kremlin said.

RUSSIA WITHDRAWAL FROM OPEN SKIES TREATY

- * Russia will officially withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty on December 18 of this year, the Foreign Ministry said on Friday, adding that Moscow has notified the depositories of the agreement about its withdrawal.
- * The European Union intends to assess the implications of Russia's withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty for its own security and for that of the partners of the bloc, the European External Action Service (EEAS) said.
- * NATO said that it deeply regrets Russia's decision to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty.

US-RUSSIA SUMMIT

- * Commenting on the assessments of the Russian-US top-level summit, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov assured that there will be no one-sided game, noting that the presidents agreed on steps on a mutually acceptable basis.
- * The NATO-led Defender Europe 2021 exercises and concerns they spark were discussed at this week's Russian-US summit in Geneva, Lavrov said.
- * The return of Russian and US ambassadors to Washington and Moscow, respectively, is a symbolic yet quite important gesture, Lavrov said.
- * Presidents Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden discussed Belarus at their recent summit in Geneva in the context of respect for national sovereignty and international law compliance, Lavrov said.

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US Stocks in Biggest Weekly Loss Since First Quarter After Fed Signals Earlier Rate Hikes

NEW YORK, June 18 (Sputnik) - US stocks suffered their biggest weekly loss since early in the year after the Federal Reserve's expedited timetable for rate hikes and stimulus tapering sparked broad risk aversion across financial markets.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, finished at 33,290, down 1.6 percent on the day. For the week, the Dow fell 3.5 percent, its most since the week ended January 22.

The S&P 500, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, closed at 4,166, down 1.3 percent on the day. For the week, the index lost 1.9 percent, its most since the week to February 19.

The Nasdaq Composite index, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, outperformed the Dow and S&P500 despite settling in the negative as well. The Nasdaq closed at 14,030, down 0.9 percent on the day and 0.3 percent on the week.

Stocks fell after the Federal Reserve signaled at the end of its monthly policy meeting on Wednesday that it will raise interest rates at least twice by the end of 2023 to 0.6 percent from current levels of between zero and 0.25 percent.

The Federal Reserve also said it was looking out for data on when to start tapering its monthly asset purchase of \$120 billion. The central bank has been buying at least \$80 billion in Treasury bonds and \$40 billion in mortgage bonds to support credit markets and the economy since the COVID-19 outbreak last year.

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UNGA Adopts Resolution Calling to Stop Selling Weapons to Myanmar

UNITED NATIONS, June 18 (Sputnik) - The UN General Assembly on Friday adopted a resolution calling on all countries to stop selling weapons to Myanmar.

The resolution, seen by Sputnik, "Recalls, in line with the [UN Secretary-General] call for a global ceasefire as supported by [UN Security Council] Res 2532, the need to de-escalate violence and in that regard calls on all member states to prevent the flow of arms into Myanmar."

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Biden Says Delta Variant Dangerous But Won't Cause Lockdowns in US

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden warned on Friday that unvaccinated people are in growing danger due to the spread of the Delta variant of coronavirus, but assured that it was unlikely to cause new lockdowns in the United States.

"The new variants will leave unvaccinated people even more vulnerable than they are or were a month ago. This is a serious concern. Especially because of what experts are calling the Delta variant. It's a variant that is more easily transmissible, potentially deadlier and particularly dangerous for young people," Biden said in public remarks at the White House.

Earlier this month, the World Health Organization included the Delta variant in its list of the so-called variants of concern as it became prevalent and caused a sharp surge in infections in some countries, especially India, where it was first identified.

Biden said that existing vaccines offer sufficient protection to fully inoculated individuals and he foresees no need for new lockdowns.

"I don't think so, because so many people have already been vaccinated," he said when asked about a possibility of lockdowns.

"But the Delta variant can cause more people to die in areas where people have not been vaccinated. Where people have gotten two shots, the Delta variant is highly unlikely to result in anything... The existing vaccines are very effective," Biden added.

He announced that the US administered over 300 million doses of coronavirus vaccines over the last 150 days with 15 states and the District of Columbia reaching a 70 percent vaccination rate.

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US Achieves 300Mln Vaccines Administered in 150 Days - Biden

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The US has managed to administer 300 million COVID-19 vaccines in a 150-day time period, President Joe Biden announced on Friday.

"I am pleased to announce that today we will have reached the mark of 300 million shots in arms in just 150 days," Biden told reporters at the White House.

According to a White House fact sheet, roughly 5 percent of adult Americans were vaccinated when Biden took office in January, at which time the US was vaccinating at a rate that would have taken the country 336 days to administer 300 million doses.

Biden referred to the US vaccination effort as part of a successful "war-time response" against COVID-19, thanks to which the country achieved the 300 million milestone today. Biden noted that the achievement is months ahead of what many believed to be possible when the pandemic started.

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Canada's Federal Court Upholds Trudeau's Controversial Hotel Quarantine Mandate

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) – The Federal Court of Canada on Friday upheld the requirement introduced by the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau which forces air arrivals into the country to quarantine at state-designated hotels.

Canadian civil liberties groups, who launched the legal battle, argued in court that the mandate was unconstitutional, contravening Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

"I have... concluded that the impugned measures were within the authority of the [Administrator in Council] AIC and were within the jurisdiction of the federal government. Finally, the impugned measures do not contravene section 1(a) of the Bill of Rights. Accordingly, these Applications will be dismissed," Chief Justice Paul Crampton wrote in the ruling.

"The rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Charter are not absolute," Crampton noted.

The justice did, however, side with one of the plaintiffs, Nicole Mathis, whose quarantine location was not disclosed to her spouse, saying that the violation of her rights "cannot be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society." Crampton explained the government has since remedied this violation, allowing passengers to book their intended place of quarantine in advance.

Canada's hotel quarantine condition – introduced in February – has been the source of intense criticism, with some women reporting being sexually assaulted, while others have likened the requirement to internment camps.

The requirement also flies in the face of a hand-picked expert panel, which called on the federal government to drop the mandate, in favor of stronger adherence to the quarantine mandate in place.

Although the Canadian government is constitutionally prohibited from barring citizens from leaving the country, the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has used the enhanced border security measures to discourage international travel amid the pandemic.

Apart from the hotel quarantine requirement, all entrants into Canada must also complete a mandatory 14-day quarantine. As of March 25, 2020, Quarantine Act violators may be subject to a fine of up to \$537,000 and/or imprisonment for six months.

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Canada Condemns Iran in Strongest Terms for Lack of Transparency on PS752 at ICAO Meeting

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - Canadian Transport Minister Omar Alghabra blasted Iran for the downing of Ukrainian International Airlines flight PS752 and its lack of transparency during the subsequent investigation, Transport Canada said on Friday following an International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) meeting.

"The Minister reiterated Canada's long-standing position on the downing of Flight PS752 and condemned Iran, in the strongest terms, for its actions that led to the tragedy and its handling of the aftermath, including its failure to provide answers," Transport Canada said in a statement.

Canada will work to strengthen international aviation rules, addressing the gaps uncovered by the Iranian Civil Aviation Organization's investigation of the crash, Alghabra added, including through its Safer Skies Strategy, which focuses on civil aviation safety in conflict zones.

According to the statement, the minister also weighed in on the Ryanair flight diversion to Belarus, saying that the "global community must remain vigilant in order to protect the safety and security of civil aviation."

Flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Tehran's international airport on January 8, 2020, after being shot down by the Iranian military. The incident claimed the lives of all 167 passengers on board the airplane - mostly Canadian and Iranian citizens - and nine Ukrainian crew members.

Tehran has admitted that its missile brought down the passenger jet, however rejects allegations that the strike was premeditated. The Iranian military maintains it was on high alert at the time of the accident, which happened hours after it fired missiles at two US bases in Iraq in retaliation for a drone strike that killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.

Despite Iran's Civil Aviation Organization concluding last month that PS752 was brought down inadvertently, a Canadian court ruled last month that Iran had deliberately downed the Ukrainian airliner - deeming the incident an act of terrorism under the Criminal Code of Canada.

Iran slammed the Ontario Superior Court of Justice's ruling as baseless and politically motivated.

Legal analysts told Sputnik that Canadian Justice Edward Belobaba's ruling is "contradictory" as it fails to account for the fact that most of the passengers were either Iranian nationals or dual citizens.

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Canada Challenges 18% US Tariffs Imposed on Solar Product Exports - Trade Minister

TORONTO, June 18 (Sputnik) - Canada is challenging the United States on imposing 18 percent tariffs on Canadian solar energy technology exports, Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade Minister Mary Ng said on Friday.

"Canada has requested a dispute settlement panel to address the United States safeguard tariffs of 18 percent on Canadian solar products," Ng said in a statement. "These tariffs are unwarranted and damaging to the global competitiveness of our long-established, secure, and deeply integrated supply chains."

Ottawa has requested a dispute settlement panel under Chapter 31 of the United States-Canada-Mexico Agreement with respect to the US safeguard tariffs on solar products from Canada, Ng said.

"Canada and the United States must be aligned and work together on the development of sustainable and equitable energy transitions and clean energy innovation. ... Moving forward with Canada's request for a dispute settlement panel on these tariffs will help ensure the timely resolution of this issue," she said.

"Canada and the United States share a long-standing mutually beneficial relationship, and our ongoing partnership will contribute to a strong, sustainable recovery, and benefit workers and businesses on both sides of the border," Ng said.

Since the imposition of the US safeguard tariffs in early 2018, exports of solar products from Canada to the United States have declined by as much as 82 percent and under the timeline provided under the trade agreement, the dispute settlement panel would be expected to issue a report in early 2022, the statement said.

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Potential Tropical Cyclone Expected to Hit US Gulf Coast Tonight - Hurricane Center

WASHINGTON, June 8 (Sputnik) - A potential tropical cyclone storm is forming in the Gulf of Mexico and expected to make landfall between the states of Louisiana and Alabama, the National Hurricane Center (NHC) said on Friday.

"Disturbance a little stronger, heavy rainfall and tropical-storm-force winds beginning to reach portion of the northern Gulf Coast," the NHC said in an advisory.

The storm is 165 miles south of Morgan City, Louisiana, and 295 miles south-southwest of Mobile, Alabama, the advisory said, adding that it is moving at 14 miles per hour.

The storm currently has sustained winds of 45 miles per hour, the advisory said.

The NHS forecasts that the storm is likely to become a tropical storm when it makes landfall along the central Gulf Coast Friday night or early Saturday, likely to cause moderate flooding in cities along the coastline.

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Canada to Have Short-Term Solution on Vaccine Verification at Border Soon - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is on track to have a short-term coronavirus vaccine verification solution at the international border soon, while a more lasting solution will be unveiled in the fall, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Friday.

"In the initial phase we will be working with the country's quarantine adherence monitoring system] ArriveCan app," Trudeau told reporters, explaining that those arrivals to Canada will have to upload their proof of full vaccination to be eligible for the loosened travel restrictions.

This short-term solution will be rolled out in the "coming weeks," Trudeau said.

Earlier in the day, Canada extended the border restrictions that limit so-called non-essential travel to and from the United States through July 21, however, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair noted that the government will announce relaxed entry rules for fully vaccinated Canadians and permanent residents on Monday.

A more lasting solution will be unveiled in the fall, the prime minister said, mentioning that the federal government is already working with the provinces, who retain Canadians' health records, on a national vaccination verification program.

Trudeau underscored the government's target of having 75 percent of Canadians vaccinated partially vaccinated and 20 percent fully vaccinated remains a prerequisite for reopening the Canada-US border, suggesting that the country is weeks away from hitting this target.

The prime minister also reassured Canadians who received at least one shot of the Oxford-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine that they will not be disadvantaged by varying vaccine authorizations around the world, saying he hopes to resolve the issue in the ensuing weeks.

On a related topic of arrivals to Canada who have not been vaccinated with a Health Canada approved vaccine, Trudeau said the country's medical experts working to gather information about such vaccines and that Ottawa hopes to have a process regarding such individuals in place before the border is reopened to international travelers.

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US Prepared Then Suspended Lethal Military Aid Package for Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The United States had prepared a \$100 million worth of arms for Ukraine, but suspended the shipment as tensions with Russia subsided, Politico reported on Friday.

In spring, the US National Security Council was directed to put the package together as the United States grew increasingly concerned over a massive Russian military exercises near the border with Ukraine and in the Crimean Peninsula, the report said quoting three anonymous sources.

"But officials on the National Security Council ended up putting the proposal on hold after Russia announced it would draw down troops stationed near Ukraine and in the lead-up to [US] President Joe Biden's high-stakes summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin," the report said.

One of the sources said the package is still intact and could be sent to Ukraine quickly.

The United States has committed more than \$2.5 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since 2014, including lethal weapons.

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US B-52 Bombers Complete Readiness Mission Through Arctic, Pacific Regions - Air Force

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - US B-52 bombers completed this week a readiness mission through the Arctic and Pacific regions, the Air Force said in a press release on Friday.

"US Air Force B-52H Stratofortress aircraft from the 2nd Bomb Wing, Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, completed long-range mission through the Arctic and Pacific regions June 17-18, 2021," the release said.

The US bombers integrated with Norwegian forces in the Nordic region before they flew through the Arctic Circle and into the northern Pacific in support of US Indo-Pacific Command, the release said.

The aircraft flew about 12,000 miles, the release noted, adding that they refueled three times via tanker aircraft.

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Trudeau Says Parliament Censure of Canadian Defense Chief 'Crass Political Attack'

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday called the parliament's censure of National Defense Minister Harjit Sajjan a crude political attack.

Late Thursday evening, the House of Commons Defense officially censured Sajjan over the ongoing military sex scandal, while citing previous examples of mismanagement at the Department of National Defense (DND) under his watch, including the failed fighter jet replacement program and the defense chief's embellishment of his military service record.

"Yesterday, [the Conservatives] put forward a crass political attack on a man who has spent a lifetime serving his country," Trudeau told reporters.

The prime minister said it is unacceptable that the Conservatives would slander Sajjan, emphasizing he has full confidence in him.

The Conservative Party, whose censure motion was backed by the other opposition parties, has renewed its push to oust Sajjan after Canada's number two officer resigned because of an ongoing sex scandal.

The Canadian military sex scandal reignited over the weekend after multiple news outlets reported that Vice Chief of the Defense Mike Rouleau and Royal Canadian Navy's Commander Vice-Admiral Craig Baines partook in a game of golf with former Chief of Defense Staff Gen. Jonathan Vance, who is under investigation after misconduct allegations were leveled against them.

The outing touched off a political storm as Rouleau holds oversight authority over the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service, which is investigating Vance. Rouleau emphasized that the two did not discuss the ongoing investigation, however, this explanation has not quelled the criticism. Former service members called the incident is another instance of the 'old boys' club' in action and a member of Trudeau's cabinet called the revelation "appalling."

Rouleau is the latest senior military official to step down from his post in relation to the sexual misconduct scandal, after Vance's replacement, Adm. Art McDonald, was forced to temporarily step aside in February and the government's vaccine distribution czar, Maj. Gen. Dany Fortin resigned from his role in May.

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UN Envoy for Myanmar Urges Security Council to Take Timely Action as Situation 'Worrisome'

UNITED NATIONS, June 18 (Sputnik) - United Nations Special Envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener on Friday urged the UN Security Council to render timely support to stop the violence in the country given the situation on the ground is very bad.

Earlier in the day, the UN Security Council held a closed meeting with the participation of Schraner Burgener to discuss the violence in Myanmar following the February 1 military coup. "The situation on the ground in Myanmar is very worrisome, it's a very bad situation," Schraner Burgener said. "I asked the Security Council for a timely support and action. We expect the council to speak with unity, especially against violence."

Schraner Burgener noted some 600 people have been killed since the February 1 coup d'etat and more than 6,000 detained by the Myanmar military. In addition, violence by security forces, a collapsed health system and food insecurity have made some 175,000 people to become internally displaced, she said.

"If the situation continues like that, we expect around half of the population will live under the poverty line," Schraner Burgener added.

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Biden Wants JCPOA Revived Before New Iranian President Takes Over in 6 Weeks - Reports

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden wants the Iran nuclear agreement revived before a new president assumes power in six weeks, Axios reported on Friday citing a US official familiar with the matter.

The Biden administration is concerned that it will become more difficult to finalize the Iran nuclear agreement negotiations before a new government comes to power in Tehran in August, the report said.

The report said Iran's judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi, a close ally to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, is a favorite to win the presidential election. The Iranians have guaranteed that negotiations would not be derailed due to the outcome of the June 18 presidential election. It is possible a deal to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) could be achieved within a few weeks, the report said.

The US official, the report said, declined to reveal what are the biggest issues left to resolve in the ongoing Vienna nuclear talks, but pointed out that there has been progress made in determining US sanctions relief and steps Iran needs to take to return to compliance.

The United States does not plan on engaging in negotiations for months on end, the report said.

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Senior US Diplomat Reeker to Travel to Italy, Albania, North Macedonia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - US Acting Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Reeker will travel to Italy, Albania and North Macedonia over the next two weeks to discuss bilateral relationships with the countries, the State Department said on Friday.

"Acting Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, Philip T. Reeker, will travel to Milan June 20-22, Tirana June 30, and Ohrid July 1-3," according to the statement.

In Milan, Reeker will discuss with local officials "the many ways the United States and Italy cooperate on economic, commercial, and other key issues." Reeker will give remarks at the annual meeting of the American Chamber of Commerce in Italy and visit the Italian Red Cross to highlight US-Italian cooperation to combat and build back from the pandemic.

From June 22-29 Reeker will adjourn his solo trip to accompany US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on his travel to Germany, France and Italy.

In Tirana on June 30, Reeker will meet with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and other senior officials to discuss "the bilateral relationship and areas of mutual concern."

On July 1, Reeker will arrive in Ohrid, the capital of North Macedonia. He will attend there the Road to Prespa Conference, a dialogue forum with neighboring Bulgaria and Greece, where Reeker will meet with Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, Foreign Minister Bugatti Osmani and other senior officials. They will discuss "shared priorities for the Western Balkans," the State Department said.

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Tropical Storm to Make Landfall Along US Gulf Coast - National Hurricane Center

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) – The US National Hurricane Center has issued a warning for the north-central Gulf Coast on Friday as a tropical storm is expected to make landfall in the state of Louisiana either tonight or early on Saturday.

“A Tropical Storm Warning is in effect for East of Morgan City, Louisiana to the Okaloosa/Walton County line Florida, Lake Pontchartrain, Lake Maurepas, and Metropolitan New Orleans,” the warning said. “On the forecast track, the system will make landfall along the north-central Gulf Coast tonight or early Saturday.”

After the landfall the tropical storm conditions are expected to slowly move northeastward across the southeastern United States over the weekend, the warning added.

The threat of up to two tornadoes across the coast of Louisiana will begin in the afternoon on Friday and continue into Saturday across southern parts of Mississippi and Alabama, to the western Florida Panhandle accompanied by heavy rain that can bring a total of four to eight inches of rainfall.

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Federal Reserve Interest Rate Hike May Need to Begin in 2022 - Bullard

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve might have to consider raising US interest rates by next year instead of 2023 as inflation could run ahead of the central bank's expectations, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis President James Bullard said on Friday.

“I put a starting [point] in late 2022,” Bullard said in an interview about his response to the Federal Reserve's projections that called for two interest rate hikes from the current range of between zero and 0.25 percent in 2023.

Bullard, who is not a voting policy-maker at the Federal Reserve, said his notion for an early start to rate tightening was based on where the central bank's guide on inflation - the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) index - stood and could go over in the next 12 to 24 months.

“By the time you get to the end of 2022, you'd already have two years of 2.5 to 3.0 percent inflation,” the St. Louis Fed president said. “To me, that would meet our new framework where we said we're going to allow inflation to run above target for some time, and from there we could bring inflation down to 2 percent over the subsequent horizon.”

On Wednesday, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell told reporters the PCE index was expected to grow by an inordinately high 3.4 percent this year due to price pressures emanating from bottlenecks in supply chains of a reopening economy. However, Powell said inflation as measured by the PCE index will likely subside to 2.1 percent by next year and remain “well anchored at 2 percent over the longer term.”

The Fed also signaled at the end of its monthly policy meeting on Wednesday that it was looking out for data on when to start tapering its monthly asset purchase of \$120 billion. The central bank has been buying at least \$80 billion in Treasury bonds and \$40 billion in mortgage bonds to support credit markets and the economy since the coronavirus outbreak last year.

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Blinken Sends US Congratulations to Guterres on Reappointment as UN Chief

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken congratulated Antonio Guterres on his reappointment to a second term as secretary-general of the United Nations on Friday.

"On behalf of the United States, I am pleased to congratulate United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on his re-appointment today by the General Assembly to serve a second term," Blinken said in a statement. "Secretary-General Guterres has proven a capable leader in a demanding role."

Blinken said the United Nations remained "an indispensable anchor" of the multilateral system and said it continued to provide a vital framework through which member states work together to meet such unprecedented challenges as the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, human rights, development, migration, and humanitarian crises.

"The United States looks forward to continuing our strong and constructive relationship with Secretary-General Guterres as we advance the urgent task of bringing about a more peaceful world and prosperous future," Blinken said.

Global issues required a collaborative, effective and results-oriented leader in the United Nations Secretariat, and Guterres fulfilled that requirement, the statement concluded.

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Pentagon Says Ready to Protect Next US Mid-Term Elections Against Cyber Threats

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) – The Pentagon is ready to protect the next mid-term elections in the United States against the threat of cyber attacks from without, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Cyber Policy, United States Department of Defense Mieke Eoyang said on Friday.

"The Department of Defense stands ready to defend the next mid-term elections," Eoyang said during an online conversation hosted by the German Marshall Fund.

Speaking of major threats Eoyang mentioned Russia and Iran. "People have spoken a lot about the Russians. Iranians have also been very aggressive in cyberspace," she said.

She also noted that US President Joe Biden raised the issue of cybersecurity during his recent meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Geneva.

On Wednesday, Putin said that he agreed with Biden to start consultations on cybersecurity while speaking at a press conference following the talks with Biden at Geneva's Villa La Grange. He added cybersecurity is extremely important for the whole world as well as for Russia and the US.

In November 2022, the US will hold mid-term elections when all 435 seats in the US House of Representatives and 34 of the 100 seats in the US Senate will be contested.

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Trudeau Congratulates Guterres on Reappointment as UN Secretary-General - Statement

TORONTO, June 18 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Friday congratulated Antonio Guterres on his reappointment as UN Secretary-General for a second term.

"On behalf of all Canadians, I congratulate Antonio Guterres on his reappointment as Secretary-General of the United Nations," Trudeau said in a statement.

The prime minister said Guterres advanced important United Nations reforms and has been instrumental in the global response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Earlier in June, the UN Security Council recommended Guterres be reappointed as UN Secretary-General for a second term in office. Based on the recommendation, the UN General Assembly did so in a special session on Friday. Guterres was the only candidate running after his home country of Portugal officially endorsed him to pursue a second term.

In his oath of office, Guterres said that throughout the second term he will do everything to ensure an optimistic scenario for a world undergoing important changes set to replace old ways of thinking.

Guterres was first appointed UN Secretary-General in 2017. He had also served as UN High Commissioner for Refugees in 2005-2015 and Prime Minister of Portugal from 1995 to 2002.

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Canada, US Extend COVID-19 Border Restrictions Through July 21 – Minister

WASHINGTON, June 18 (Sputnik) - Canada is extending the border restrictions that limit so-called non-essential travel to and from the United States through July 21 amid the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said on Friday.

"In coordination with the US, we are extending restrictions on non-essential international travel and with the United States until July 21, 2021," Blair said in a statement via Twitter.

Blair added that the government will announce relaxed entry rules for fully vaccinated Canadians and permanent residents on Monday.

All non-essential travel between the United States and Canada has been halted since March 2020, however, reports indicated the Canadian and US governments are engaged in conversations to begin a gradual reopening of their mutual land border.

Prior to the announcement, the restrictions at US land border crossings with Canada and Mexico were set to expire on June 21.

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Guterres Appointed UN Secretary-General for 2nd Term Starting 2022 - General Assembly

UNITED NATIONS, June 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday was appointed for a second term at the helm of the organization, UN General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir said.

"The General Assembly has just appointed you Secretary-General of the United Nations for the term of office beginning January 1, 2022, and ending on December 31, 2026," Bozkir told Guterres after a swearing-in ceremony.

Earlier in June, the UN Security Council recommended Guterres for the Secretary-General's position. Based on the recommendation, the UN General Assembly appointed Guterres for the second term in office in a special session on Friday. Guterres was the only candidate running for the position, after his home country, Portugal, officially endorsed him to pursue a second term. In his oath of office, Guterres said throughout the second term he will do everything to ensure an optimistic scenario for the world undergoing important changes set to replace old ways of thinking.

"We are truly at a crossroads, with consequential choices before us. Paradigms are shifting. Old orthodoxies are being flipped," Guterres pointed out.

Under such circumstances, the United Nations itself has to accelerate the transformation to achieve better communications, digital change, more robust performance, bureaucracy reduction and strengthened cooperation, Guterres said.

He also said during the second term, the organization will need to do utmost to overcome the current geostrategic divides and "dysfunctional" power relations among nations.

"I will give it my all to ensure the blossoming of trust between and among nations, large and small, to build bridges and to engage relentlessly in confidence building," Guterres added.

Guterres was first appointed UN Secretary-General in 2017. Before the current role, Guterres served as UN High Commissioner for Refugees in 2005-2015 and Prime Minister of Portugal from 1995 to 2002.

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US Ambassador to UN Congratulates Guterres on Reappointment as Secretary-General

UNITED NATIONS, June 18 (Sputnik) - The United States congratulated Antonio Guterres with his appointment as UN Secretary-General for a second term, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said in a statement on Friday.

Earlier on Friday, the UN General Assembly swore Guterres in office for the second term which is set to span from January 2022 to December 2026.

"On behalf of the United States, I am pleased to congratulate Antonio Guterres on his reappointment as UN Secretary-General," Thomas-Greenfield said.

The US diplomat said Guterres' appointment is a testament to his leadership in tackling the current challenges.

"The United States recognizes the many challenges the Secretary-General will face in the coming years, and we hope that... the next five years will see more peace, more security, and more prosperity than the last," she said.

Thomas-Greenfield also stated in order to achieve these goals, UN member states will be required to demonstrate their commitment and respect for human rights.

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